

The Collection at Independence NHP

Source of Information “Not Found in Books”¹

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The Independence National Historical Park architectural study collection preserves examples of Delaware Valley building technology from the mid-18th to mid-19th centuries. National Park Service (NPS) architects Charles Peterson, Donald Benson, George Willman, and others, initiated the study collection in 1951 when they were seeking information about 18th-century construction techniques for the restoration of Independence Hall and other park historic structures. At that time there were few written or illustrated sources for early flashing, joinery, and hardware; the only real documents were local examples of period architecture.

Material for the collection was obtained in a variety of ways. Development and urban renewal provided the mixed blessing of salvaging study elements from condemned buildings. For example, one NPS work crew saved an entire upper-story corner section of a wooden house (c. 1790) at 33 1/2 Catherine Street in the Southwark district, thus capturing framing, flooring, plastering, and roofing methods in one primary document. (For a similar example, see figure 2.)

Structures in Independence Park have also given up their secrets to the architectural study collection. The interior of Independence Hall was renovated throughout the 19th century and some rooms have been restored to their “original” appearance several times. For the NPS restoration, the architects combined documentary research and physical evidence found within the building. Structural hardware and decorative elements preserved behind walls and beneath floor boards provided clues to construction, paint colors, and treatment of walls and cornices. A small painted dentil recovered from beneath the Assembly Room floor corroborated the trim color and the proportions of the room’s cornice. Similar evidence was collected from other historic structures in the park. Staff have also archived examples of reproduction materials used in recent restorations, adding to the buildings’ histories.

At present the collection contains some 3,000 artifacts that represent structures within the park and contemporary buildings in the area. The objects reflect changes in technology and taste through materials, techniques, and styles. Exhibits, training programs, and tours have been developed using the collection, and a collections management project is increasing accessibility for research and interpretation.

Documentation and security have ensured the collection’s usefulness and longevity. Former Independence National Historical Park historic architect Penelope Hartshorne Batcheler was a driving force in seeing that

objects were accessioned and secured. Her premise, “anything that doesn’t look important is in danger of being thrown away,” is a sound maxim for architectural fragments. The architectural artifacts are accessioned in the park museum collection and approximately 30% have been cataloged in the Automated National Catalog System (ANCS) thus far. Approximately 80% of the objects have provenance, and the architects often sketched or photographed the components *in situ* before removal. Field sketches and notes comprise much of the information, along with approximately 200 photographs, 35 measured drawings, and 20 HABS records. Historic structures reports interpret the evidence found in eight park buildings. There are also 45 linear feet of interior and exterior photographs, dating from the 1900s to the present, of structures within and around the Park; they document details and overviews, preservation and demolition. All these resources are held in the First Bank, but are separated into several smaller collections with no comprehensive index.

The bulk of the collection is stored in the basement of the First Bank of the United States, where it was organized and inventoried in 1974. Artifacts under 30” in length were stored in baked enamel specimen cabinets; doors and shutters were grouped in loose piles against each other; and large elements were stacked in vertical bins. *Built By Hand*, installed in 1983, introduces visitors to the collection. It illustrates the scope of the collection and the various 18th-century construction skills such as joinery, turning, and plastering. The First Bank storage has been open occasionally for academic and training groups since the early 1980s, ensuring a minimum level of housekeeping and care. It is now on a routine cleaning cycle maintained

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Fig. 1. Young visitors view a staircase from a new perspective at *See What They Sawed in the First Bank, 1970-1973*. The North Water Street window lintel is to the right of the staircase. In addition to architectural fragments, the exhibit included tools, carpentry books, a ten-plate stove, and a cast iron water closet. Photo by George Eisenman, courtesy Independence National Historical Park.

by the Museum Operations technical staff.

There are two approaches to the storage of architectural fragments: they may be removed to a separate facility, or kept at their original site. The park employs both strategies by storing related artifacts in the Independence Hall tower and in the Deshler-Morris House in Germantown. These portions of the collection are not available to compare to the other objects, but can be studied in their original locations.

In September 1992, chief curator Doris Fanelli assigned the author, whose internship is funded by the Friends of Independence National Historical Park, to reorganize and inventory the study collection in the First Bank. Storage had been limited to two rooms; cabinets were overcrowded and large objects were inaccessible. The curatorial staff freed an additional room for storage, allowing the collection to be spread out for better care and visibility, and ordered more cabinets, thus doubling the capacity. According to the intern's design, a wooden rack was constructed for doors and shutters, storing each one in a separate padded slot. Shelves installed in existing bins made better use of vertical space. All units were marked in a sequential order and the rationale behind the numbering was included with the inventory.

Time constraints have limited the inventory to a basic survey of objects independent of ANCS; it is maintained on dBase IIIPlus. The file structure consists of location by room, cabinet, and drawer numbers; accession and catalogue numbers; object name, based on period sources when possible; description; date; provenance; and association, if a family name is connected to the original building. The primary goal is to produce a descriptive record of object locations; additional benefits are an account of how

many objects need to be catalogued, and a database that can be searched by any combination of the fields. Artifacts are stored by form, such as locks, cornices, and baseboards, for comparative purposes, but all the objects from one structure can be located by a provenance search.

The architectural study collection has maintained a steady, if subtle, profile over the last three decades. A

major exhibit, entitled *See What They Sawed*, was on display in the First Bank from 1970 to 1973 while the building was the temporary visitor center (figure 1). Doors, shutters, and hardware were mounted on colorful geometric pedestals—vibrant red, yellow, and purple—thereby forcing a comparison to standard exhibit techniques for works of art. Potted plants on a salvaged staircase assembly and the title itself conveyed that this was a popular exhibit with a sense of humor. The premise for the show was “that there is little new under the sun, that the problems of keeping dry, keeping warm, and keeping up with the Joneses are ageless”²; architecture is a stylish solution to all these problems.

Other institutions have used the collection in exhibits since 1973. A large portion of *See What They Sawed* was loaned to the Philadelphia Museum of Art's “Touch-It” display, designed to teach school groups about historic houses. Architectural fragments were the focus of a mobile exhibit, *Pennsylvania Lost, Pennsylvania Found*, by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. And specific building components have received their own shows: *Sheet Metal Craftsmanship* at the National Building Museum, and *Windows Through Time* which has appeared in Philadelphia, New York, and Albany. [Note article on back page.]

Architectural historians have explored the collection's rich potential as a database. There are numerous architects who honed their preservation skills retrieving artifacts as part of their park duties, including John Milner, William Murtagh, and James Massey. Lee Nelson developed his nail chronology while working at the Independence National Historical Park in the 1950s and 1960s.³ Paint analyst Frank Welsh has reassessed paint samples from Independence Hall using new technology.

Academic programs in architecture, historic preservation, and museum studies tour the collection regularly, and these visits have resulted in several projects. [Note Milner article on page 24.] University of Pennsylvania historic preservation graduate students have done a dozen measured drawings and written several term papers⁴ and a thesis⁵ using the collection as a primary resource; copies of these works are kept with the study collection documentary resources. American civilization students have also relied on the objects for research—testimony to the artifacts' interdisciplinary appeal. And University of Delaware museum studies students selected objects for inclusion in their 1989 exhibit *Building in the Delaware Valley 1750-1850*.

The collection has proven useful for other audiences as well. Park interpretive rangers receive occasional architectural training, as do historic house guides from other institutions. An understanding of interior details is as important to good interpretation as knowledge of furnishings. Children have learned about architecture as well; fifth grade groups have visited the collection, and Penny Batcheler conducted a traveling presentation entitled “Parts of the House That Jack Built.”

The recent collection management project has enhanced the collection's research value. Comparative analysis is more feasible, as the database can group records by date and provenance, and objects are easier to locate and examine with the new storage units. While essential information has been included in the inventory data base, approximate-



Fig. 2. This c. 1750 building at 115 North Water Street in Philadelphia was demolished in May 1963. A National Park Service work crew saved the window lintel and a portion of the belt course from the second story. Skilled workers were able to remove and preserve unusual artifacts such as this during the urban “renewal” of the 1960s and 1970s. Photo by James L. Dillon and Company, courtesy Independence National Historical Park.

ly two-thirds of the collection remains to be entered in ANCS. Resource management records, such as field notes, photographs, and sketches, need to be cataloged according to archival standards being incorporated into ANCS.⁶ Adapting ANCS to allow cross-referencing of artifacts and resource management records would permit ready access to all the rich architectural resources the park has to offer.

Continued research and development of the collection, as outlined above, is hampered by financial constraints. But these projects can provide valuable training for students of historic preservation, museum studies, and related fields. There are opportunities for cooperation between professional organizations or academic programs and the park. Preparing, preserving, and promoting the artifacts as an object archive, and encouraging outside research and programming, may be park's best course of action on a limited budget.

The Independence National Historical Park Architectural Study Collection is available, by appointment, to professionals and students in architectural and historical fields. Call 215-597-7085 for further information.

¹ Charles E. Peterson, "The Wide World of Windows: Notes Issued for a Visit to the Independence Architectural Study Collection" (Philadelphia, November 17, 1989, photocopy), 13 pp. Mr. Peterson often uses this phrase to sum up the importance of architectural study collections.

² Lee H. Nelson and Penelope Hartshorne Batcheler, "A Proclamation" (INDE, August 24, 1970, Typescript).

³ Lee H. Nelson, "Nail Chronology as an Aid to Dating Old Buildings," *History News* 24, (November 1968): *Technical Leaflet* 48.

⁴ Natica Schmeder, "Evolution of the Mechanical Systems of 315 South American Street, Philadelphia," term paper, University of Pennsylvania, May 1991; Elise Vider, "Early American Locks," term paper, University of Pennsylvania, December 1989.

⁵ Carl Nittinger, "A Primary Resource for the Restoration, Reconstruction and/or Replication of 18th & Early 19th Century Architectural Elements: The Architectural Study Collection of Independence National Historical Park," Master's thesis, Graduate Program in Historic Preservation, University of Pennsylvania, 1991.

⁶ National Park Service, *Museum Handbook, Part II* (April 29, 1993, Draft), Appendix D:1-6.

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Webster, Richard. *Philadelphia Preserved: Catalog of the Historic American Buildings Survey*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981. Synopses of Philadelphia HABS reports; indicates when, and what, artifacts from a property are in the park study collection. Seventeen entries are listed in the index. Copies of all entries are on file at the park.

John Marks, a museum intern hired by the Friends of Independence National Historical Park (INHP) to inventory the architectural study collection at the park, is a 1992 graduate of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in History Museum Studies with an emphasis on the management and interpretation of collections.

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stored in a large barn (which has since been dismantled). Currently, the collection is divided among two other barns and a warehouse. SPNEA's central storage warehouse offers a secure, fireproof, and climate-controlled environment for all the society's collections, including many of the architectural elements. Here, as well as in the two barns, objects are arranged primarily by type and size.

Presently, architectural elements are acquired almost exclusively through donations, many of the objects coming from buildings undergoing demolition or restoration. SPNEA's current collecting and cataloging policies regarding all collections are applicable to the architectural elements collection as well. That is, the artifact must contribute to our further understanding of the material culture of New England.

All of the architectural elements in the collection have been catalogued, detailing location, description (material, size, shape, condition, etc) and historic associations (structure from which the element came, maker, donor, etc). The cataloging information on each object is then entered into the Collection Department's computer database. Accessibility to the collection through the database is impressive. All objects, architectural elements included, can be tracked using almost any attribute or factor, including location, material, donor, type and building. In the near future, images including those from the archival collection, will also be integrated into the database. Through this integration on the computer of the architectural elements collection with other SPNEA collections and archival information, an even larger contextual picture for all the collections, including the architectural elements, can be drawn.

¹ Floyd, Margaret Henderson. "Measured Drawings of the Hancock House by John Hubbard Sturgis: A Legacy to the Colonial Revival." in *Architecture in Colonial Massachusetts*. Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1979, page 88.

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